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ABSTRACT

Adult basic and literacy education (ABLE) is a complex undertaking that serves diverse learners with a variety of needs. Although no definitive list of adult education principles exists in the literature, the following principles have been identified in multiple sources devoted to principles of effective adult education: involve learners in planning and implementing learning activities; draw upon learners' experience as a resource; cultivate self-direction in learners; create a climate that encourages and supports learning; foster a spirit of collaboration in the learning setting; and use small groups. The following are ways adult educators can improve their ABLE programs by making them more student centered and participatory in nature: involve adults in program planning and implementation by asking them to assist with orientation for new learners, appointing adults to serve on advisory boards, and/or soliciting their suggestions for learning activities; develop and/or use instructional materials that are based on students' lives; develop an understanding of learners' experiences and communities; and incorporate small groups into learning activities. ABLE programs that incorporate these recommendations will foster increasing self-directedness and critical reflection in learners, which will in turn increase adult educators' success in attracting and retaining more adults in ABLE programs. (Contains 18 references) (MN)

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Using Adult Learning Principles in Adult Basic and Literacy Education Practice Application Brief

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PRACTICE APPLICATION BRIEF

Using Adult Learning Principles in Adult Basic and Literacy Education

Adult basic and literacy education (ABLE) is a complex undertaking that serves diverse learners with a variety of needs, and many individual ABLE programs successfully attract and retrain students. Only 8 percent of eligible adults participate in funded programs, however, and, of those who do, most (74 percent) leave during the first year (Quigley 1997). A number of reasons exist for the nonparticipation and high attrition rates, including the complicated nature of the lives of many adults. The way ABLE programs are structured may also be a factor. The fact that most ABLE programs still resemble school (Quigley 1997; Velazquez 1996) may mean that many eligible adults may not choose to participate or, once enrolled, do not find a compelling reason for persisting until their educational needs are met. Structuring programs around adult education principles can be one solution to developing programs that are more appealing to ABLE learners. This *Practice Application Brief* describes how adult education principles can be used in ABLE programs. Following a discussion of adult education principles, it provides recommendations for practices, based on the principles and literature related to adult basic and literacy education.

Adult Education Principles

No definitive list of adult education principles exists in the literature, but there is a great deal of agreement about what constitutes good practice in adult education. The list of principles that follows was developed by synthesizing information that appears in a number of sources (Brookfield 1986; Draper 1992; Draves 1997; Grissom 1992; Imel forthcoming; Knowles 1992; Vella 1994).

- **Involve learners in planning and implementing learning activities.** Including learners in the planning and implementing of their learning activities is considered to be a hallmark of adult education. Their participation can begin with the needs assessment process where members of the target population help establish the program goals and objectives and continue throughout the learning activity to the evaluation phase.

- **Draw upon learners' experiences as a resource.** Another often-cited principle of adult education revolves around the idea of using the experiences of participants as a learning resource. Not only do adult learners have experiences that can be used as a foundation for learning new things but also, in adulthood, readiness to learn frequently stems from life tasks and problems. The particular life situations and perspectives that adults bring to the classroom can provide a rich reservoir for learning.

- **Cultivate self-direction in learners.** Self-direction is considered by some to be a characteristic of adulthood but not all adults possess this attribute in equal measure. In addition, if adults have been accustomed to teacher-directed learning environments, they may not display self-directedness in adult learning settings. Adult learning should be structured to nurture the development of self-directed, empowered adults. When adults are encouraged to become self-directed, they begin "to see themselves as proactive, initiating individuals engaged in a continuous re-creation of their personal relationships, work worlds, and social circumstances rather than as reactive individuals, buffeted by uncontrollable forces of circumstance" (Brookfield 1986, p. 19).

- **Create a climate that encourages and supports learning.** The classroom environment should be characterized by trust and mutual respect among teachers and learners. It should enhance learner self-esteem. Supporting and encouraging learning does not mean that the environment is free of conflict. It does mean that when conflict occurs, it is handled in a way that challenges learners to acquire new perspectives and supports them in their efforts to do so.

- **Foster a spirit of collaboration in the learning setting.** Collaboration in the adult classroom is frequently founded on the idea that the roles of teachers and learners can be interchangeable. Although teachers have the overall responsibility for leading a learning activity, in adult learning settings "each person has something to teach and to learn from the other" (Draper 1992, p. 75). Adult learning is a cooperative enterprise that respects and draws upon the knowledge that each person brings to the learning setting.

- **Use small groups.** The use of groups has deep historical roots in adult education, and adults learning in groups has become embedded in adult education practice. Groups promote teamwork and encourage cooperation and collaboration among learners. Structured appropriately, they emphasize the importance of learning from peers, and they allow all participants to be involved in discussions and to assume a variety of roles.

The principles discussed here reflect some of the widely held beliefs about adult learning. The next section provides recommendations for using these principles in adult basic and literacy education programs.

Recommendations for Practice

A growing number of ABLE programs base their practices upon many of the principles described, and recent resources have advocated programs that are more student centered and participatory in nature (e.g., Auerbach 1992; Fingeret 1992; Nonesuch 1996; Sissel 1996; Stein 1995). The following recommendations for practice that reflects adult education principles are based on information found in several of these resources.

- **Involve adults in program planning and implementation.** The need to consult adults is a theme that is woven throughout the ABLE literature (e.g., Auerbach 1992; Nonesuch 1996; Sissel 1996; Velazquez 1996). Adult basic and literacy educators frequently give lip service to the importance of learner involvement, but they do not always follow through. They must listen to what adults say about their previous educational experiences and their current learning goals and use this information in program development. Auerbach (1992) provides a rationale for using a participatory approach that is based partly on the idea that "adult education is most effective when it is experience-centered, related to learners' real needs, and directed by learners themselves" (p. 14). In participatory ABLE programs, activities reflect students' lives and are student centered. ABLE programs can involve students in program planning and implementation in any number of ways, including asking them to assist with orientation for new learners, appointing them to serve on advisory boards, and soliciting their suggestions for learning activities.

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- **Develop and/or use instructional materials that are based on students' lives.** An important part of the participatory approach is using instruction that reflects the context of students' lives. Sometimes referred to as contextualized learning, this instruction—and the instructional materials—draw on the actual experiences, developmental stages, and problems of the learners. Students are the center of the curriculum and it is directly relevant to their lives (Auerbach 1992; Dirkx and Prenger 1997; Nash et al. 1992). Dirkx and Prenger (1997) refer to this approach as "theme based" and describe how it promotes the integration of academic content with real-life problems. Furthermore, it has the advantage of integrating academic skills; rather than focusing on learning academic subjects separately, the theme-based approach focuses on their commonalities and promotes learning them in ways that are meaningful to the student. By using this approach, the classroom becomes more authentic because adults learn to use skills in real-life situations.

- **Develop an understanding of learners' experiences and communities.** Engaging in participatory adult literacy begins by respecting learners' culture, their knowledge, and their experiences (Auerbach 1992). Within adult basic and literacy education, a great deal of attention has been focused on individualizing instruction to meet individual needs. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with this concept, preoccupation with serving individuals can suppress issues of gender, race, and class, issues that reproduce the realities of the lives of many adult literacy students (Campbell 1992). A growing number of adult literacy educators are advocating for understanding learners both as individuals and as members of their particular communities or groups (Nonesuch 1996; Sissel 1996) and tailoring instruction to address those particular contexts. For example, Nonesuch (1996) describes how the experiences of women can be used effectively in developing a curriculum.

- **Incorporate small groups into learning activities.** Small groups can help achieve a learning environment that is more learner centered and collaborative than either large group or one-on-one, individualized approaches to instruction. In addition, learning in small groups more accurately reflects the contexts in which adults generally use literacy skills. Small groups have a number of advantages including providing peer support for learning and easing the distinction between teachers and learners by creating a cooperative, participative environment that is less hierarchical than environments produced by traditional approaches. Small groups can be an effective tool for generating themes and ideas that will form the basis for learning activities (Imel, Kerka, and Pritz 1994).

ABLE programs that incorporate these recommendations will foster increasing self-directedness and critical reflection in learners. Learners who are involved in planning and carrying out contextualized learning activities will develop heightened awareness of their own particular circumstances and the ability to make changes in it.

Conclusion

If adult basic and literacy educators are to be successful in attracting and retaining more adults in their programs, they must change how they think about their programs (Quigley 1997). The schooling model that predominates must be exchanged for one that is based on adults' perceptions of their goals and purposes and that addresses the realities of their lives. Using adult education principles can be one vehicle for effecting this change.

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